

9/30/21 Wires

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US Approves Possible \$16Bln Military Sale to Switzerland Including 40 F-35s - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 30, 2020 - The US State Department has approved a possible Foreign Military Sale to Switzerland of forty F-35 jets, forty F/A-18 jets and related equipment for an estimated cost of over \$16 billion, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Switzerland of forty (40) F-35 Joint Strike Fighter aircraft and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$6.58 billion," the statement said. "The Defense Security Cooperation Agency delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale today."

In addition, the State Department said it also made a determination to approve a possible Foreign Military Sale to Switzerland of forty F/A-18E/F Super Hornet aircraft and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$7.452 billion.

Finally, the State Department said it made a determination to approve a possible Foreign Military Sale to Switzerland of five Patriot Configuration-3+ Modernized Fire Units and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$2.2 billion.

The proposed sales will not alter the basic military balance in the region and Switzerland will have no difficulty absorbing the aircraft and equipment into its armed forces, the statement said.

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US-Led Coalition Says Rocket Fire Did Not Strike Base in Iraq's Erbil

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) spokesman Col. Wayne Marotto said in a statement on Wednesday that rocket fire did not strike a Coalition base in Iraq's Erbil and there are no casualties or damage to report.

"Initial reports that Indirect Fire did not land on Coalition Forces in Erbil tonight. There was no damage or casualties. Incident is under investigation," Marotto said in the statement.

Reuters reported, citing Iraqi Kurdistan's counterterrorism service, that Iran-backed Iraqi paramilitary groups fired six rockets towards Coalition forces in Erbil International Airport. The report said four rockets hit near the edge of the airport facility and two did not explode.

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US Sees China as Global Hotspot for Goods Made With Forced Labor - Government Report

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has identified China as the leading global hotspot for the manufacture of goods made with forced or child labor, the Department of Labor said in a report on Wednesday that highlighted nearly 80 countries for the practice.

"Forced labor and abusive child labor are dehumanizing, ruining lives and families," US Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia said in a statement accompanying the report. "Today's list illustrates the disturbing role of China – the world's second largest economy – in sponsoring these exploitative practices."

The report, a biennial list of goods believed to be produced by child or forced labor, cited 17 Chinese-made products, from gloves to Christmas decorations. The Labor Department has in the past highlighted its growing concern over treatment of Uighur Muslims in the country's Xinjiang region.

The report comes after the Department of Homeland Security said on September 14 that it will block the import of goods made in China's Xinjiang province to combat alleged forced labor practices, the Department of Homeland Security said on Monday.

Human rights groups say Chinese authorities have detained more than a million people - from mostly Muslim ethnic groups that include Uighurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz - in a vast network of detention centers as part of an assimilation campaign.

China has denied the charges, saying the camps it built for Uighurs and other minorities were for vocational and Chinese language training and not for slave labor.

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Trump Campaign Says Debate Commission Should Not Change Rules - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Trump reelection campaign communications director Tim Murtaugh said in a statement on Wednesday that the Commission on Presidential Debates should not modify the rules to the debate format in middle of the election year.

"They're only doing this because their guy got pummeled last night," Murtaugh said in the statement. "President [Donald] Trump was the dominant force and now Joe Biden is trying to work the refs. They shouldn't be moving the goalposts and changing the rules in the middle of the game."

Earlier in the day, the Commission said it will soon announce changes to the format of the presidential debates after issues emerged during the first debate between Trump and Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden on Tuesday night.

The first debate has been widely criticized by the US public for being disorderly after moderator Chris Wallace failed to take control of the event.

The next two presidential debates are scheduled for October 15 in Florida and October 22 in Tennessee. The vice presidential candidates' only debate is set for October 7 in Utah.

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Trump Says US Militia Groups Must Stand Down, Let Police Handle Riots

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump on Wednesday called on US militia groups to stand down and let law enforcement quell violent civil unrest in the United States.

Trump faced backlash after he did not denounce white supremacy when asked during Tuesday night's debate against Democratic rival Joe Biden.

"I don't know who the Proud Boys are... I can only say they have to stand down and let law enforcement do their work," Trump told reporters outside the White House. "Everybody, whatever group you're talking about, let law enforcement do the work."

Trump also denounced any form of white supremacy and called on Biden to denounce the left-wing Antifa group.

The two other presidential debates are scheduled for October 15 in Florida and October 22 in Tennessee. The vice presidential candidates' only debate is set for October 7 in Utah.

Biden is ahead by 6.4% on average in the most recent 11 national polls published on Realclearpolitics.com (RCP). However, because of the Electoral College format, statewide polls are more significant. Biden is slightly ahead in eight of the ten largest so-called battleground or swing states, according to RCP.

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White House Blocks CDC Order to Keep Cruise Ships Docked Over COVID-19 - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The White House has blocked an order from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to keep cruise ships docked as a precautionary step against the COVID-19, The New York Times reported on Wednesday.

The move seemed designed to appease politically-sensitive Florida and its tourism industry, the report said, citing a senior federal health official.

The CDC has had a "no sail" policy for all cruise vessels after such ships became viral hot spots for COVID-19 at the height of the pandemic in March, and the ruling was to have been renewed Wednesday under a recommendation by its director Robert Redfield, the report added.

But at a meeting of the coronavirus task force on Tuesday, Redfield's plan was overruled, according to the report.

Tourism-focused Florida, home to Disneyland, is a crucial swing state for President Donald Trump in the upcoming November 3 election. Pollsters, including those in US media, have the president trailing his Democrat challenger Joe Biden in all almost key races for the election. This is not the first time the White House has gone against the counsel of the CDC, with Trump regularly clashing with the agency on its advice that mask wearing was one of the best ways of preventing the spread of the COVID-19. Many Trump supporters refuse to don masks, aping the president who is hardly seen wearing one. Trump has also refused to make face coverings mandatory, arguing that it was the democratic right of Americans to decide if they wanted to wear one.

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Canada GDP Grows By 3% in July, Remains 6% Below Pre-Pandemic Level - Report

TORONTO, September 30 (Sputnik) - Canada's gross domestic product rose by 3 percent in July, but still remains 6 percent below pre-coronavirus pandemic levels, Statistics Canada said in a report for July on Wednesday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) grew 3.0 percent in July, following a 6.5 percent increase in June," Statistics Canada said. "Overall economic activity was still about 6 percent below February's pre-pandemic level."

Canada's economy grew by 4.8 percent in May, following two straight months of record declines in March and April due to the coronavirus-induced shutdown.

Statistics Canada said all 20 of the country's industrial sectors saw increased economic activity. On Tuesday, the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) said in a report that the Canadian economy is expected to recover to the pre-coronavirus pandemic levels by early 2022.

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US Invests \$300Mln to Protect Native Americans, Alaskans From Crime - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The US government has approved almost \$300 million in grants to more effectively fight crime and aid its victims in American Indian and Alaskan native communities, the Department of Justice announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"The Department of Justice today announced it has awarded more than \$295.8 million to improve public safety, serve victims of crime and support youth programs in American Indian and Alaska Native communities," the release said.

More than \$103 million was awarded under the Justice Department's Coordinated Tribal Assistance Solicitation (CTAS) to enhance law enforcement and tribal justice practices, expand victim services and sustain crime prevention and intervention efforts, the release noted.

"American Indian and Alaska Native communities experience rates of violent crime and domestic abuse that are among the highest in the nation. The awards announced today underscore the Department of Justice's deep commitment to improving public safety in tribal communities throughout the United States," Attorney General William Barr said.

The new funding would provide a critical component to the overall public safety strategy for tribal law enforcement ensuring that US tribal communities had the resources they needed, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Director Phil Keith said in the release.

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UN Member States Commit Nearly \$1Bln for COVID-19 Response, Vaccine Access - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, September 30 (Sputnik) - Nearly \$1 billion has been contributed by countries at the UN high-level event held earlier on Wednesday to strengthen the coordinated

global response to the COVID-19 pandemic and stress the need to have vaccine available to all, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a press briefing.

"Nearly a billion dollars in new financing has been committed to the initiative [COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator], which is really the most comprehensive multilateral end-to-end solution for the pandemic," Dujarric said.

The largest contributions, he added, were made by the United Kingdom, which gave \$732 million to support the initiative and aid vulnerable countries, Canada with \$332 million and Germany with about \$117 million in funding.

Sweden also made a commitment to provide \$10 million to the COVAX vaccine facility.

The World Bank this week announced plans to contribute \$12 billion to help developing countries to purchase COVID-19 vaccines once they are available.

The ACT-Accelerator, launched by the World Health Organization, European Commission, France and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation back in April, requires an additional \$35 billion to be able to produce 2 billion vaccine doses, 245 million treatments and 500 million tests, according to a UN press release issued later on the subject.

At the earliest convenience, the ACT-Accelerator requires \$15 billion to support research, development, manufacturing, procurement and delivery mechanisms by the end of 2020.

The COVAX facility is co-led by the Gavi vaccine alliance, the World Health Organization and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations. It is part of the ACT-Accelerator under to bring together vaccine developers from different countries in a common quest for a safe COVID-19 vaccine.

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Pentagon Lifts COVID-19 Travel Restrictions at Over Half of US Military Installations

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Most of the US military installations around the world lifted the novel coronavirus-related travel restrictions, the Defense Department said in a status update notice on Wednesday.

"Travel restrictions lifted at 135 of 231 installations. Of the 135 installations with lifted travel restrictions this week, zero reinstated travel restrictions while 18 lifted restrictions," the notice said.

All of the installations have met major safety criteria imposed by the military leadership as well as local authorities, the notice said.

Most of the military bases in which the restrictions remain in force are located in the United States, the notice added.

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US Lawmakers Push New Plan Seeking to End Communist Control of China

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The US government and Congress must commit to a bipartisan long-term policy of ending Communist Party control of China, the Republican House China Task Force said in a report on Wednesday.

"The administration should clearly and publicly state an intention to break the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]'s totalitarianism," the report said. "America's goal must not be indefinite coexistence with a hostile Communist state, but rather, the end of the Party's monopoly on power."

The administration must prioritize combatting China by using federal resource including foreign assistance for the Indo Pacific region.

The lawmakers also demanded that Congress pass more legislation targeting China for alleged human rights abuses, allegations Beijing has repeatedly denied.

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Distributed Denial of Service Attacks Can Not Stop Voting in US Elections - FBI

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks could hinder access to voting information, but would not prevent voting in the 2020 US federal elections, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) said in a joint announcement on Wednesday.

"The public should be aware that if foreign actors or cyber criminals were able to successfully conduct DDoS attacks against election infrastructure, the underlying data and internal systems would remain uncompromised, and anyone eligible to vote would still be able to cast a ballot," the announcement said.

Cyber actors have falsely claimed in the past that DDoS attacks have compromised the integrity of US voting systems in an effort to mislead the public that the attack would prevent a voter from casting a ballot or change votes already cast, the announcement said.

However, the FBI and CISA have no reporting to suggest a DDoS attack has ever prevented a registered voter from casting a ballot, or compromised the integrity of any ballots cast, the announcement added.

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Biden Says Trump Conduct at Debate Was 'National Embarrassment'

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden said President Donald Trump was a national embarrassment during Tuesday night's debate and moderators should do more to prevent interruptions in the future.

The two presidential contenders squared off in a nationally-televised debate from Cleveland, Ohio on Tuesday. It was the first of three debates that will be held before the November 3 election.

"He not only attacked me constantly and my family but he attacked the moderator," Biden told reporters on Wednesday. "The president of the United States, conducting himself the way he did, I think it was just a national embarrassment."

Tuesday's debate devolved into a heckling match led by Trump who constantly disobeyed pleas by moderator Chris Wallace of the Fox News network to let Biden answer questions. A CBS poll found that 80 percent of viewers believed the tone of the debate was "negative."

"I just hope there's a way in which the debate commission can control the ability for us to answer the question without an interruption," Biden said.

Biden said he did not want to speculate on what happens in the second or third debate, but did suggest that moderators control microphones.

"My hope is that they're [moderators] able to literally say 'The question is asked to Trump. Here's the microphone. He has two minutes to answer the question. No one else has a microphone.' I don't know what the actual rules are going to be literally, but that's what seems to me to make some sense," he added.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Commission on Presidential Debates said it will make format changes to address these issues.

The two other presidential debates are scheduled for October 15 in Florida and October 22 in Tennessee. The vice presidential candidates' only debate is set for October 7 in Utah.

Biden is ahead by 6.4% on average in the most recent 11 national polls published on Realclearpolitics.com (RCP). However, because of the Electoral College format, statewide polls are more significant. Biden is slightly ahead in eight of the ten largest so-called battleground or swing states, according to RCP.

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US House Passes Bill to Assess Threat From Foreign White Supremacist Groups

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation on Wednesday that would direct the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to assess the threat of foreign violent white supremacist organizations to the United States, among other tasks.

The bill passed by voice and will now head to the Senate for consideration.

"To direct the Under Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis of the Department of Homeland Security to develop and disseminate a threat assessment regarding threats to the United States associated with foreign violent white supremacist extremist organizations, and for other purposes," the bill says.

In February, the security firm Soufan Group said in a report that there has been an increasing globalization of white supremacist extremism, especially in North America, Europe and Australia.

The report noted that no white supremacist organizations have been designated as foreign terrorist organizations in the United States, which means that law enforcement has fewer resources at its disposal to combat such groups.

Moreover, on September 17, FBI Director Christopher Wray said white supremacists make up the largest group of racially-motivated domestic terrorists in the United States.

Earlier this month, former DHS official Elizabeth Neumann told National Public Radio that the Trump administration is creating conditions that may allow domestic right-wing extremism to expand in the United States because of President Donald Trump's rhetoric and refusal to condemn such groups.

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US Must Remove Critical Industries' Reliance on China Supply Chain - Congressional Report

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The United States must move its critical industries, especially in advanced technology and vital medical equipment and supplies, away from dependency on supply chains originating in China, US House Republican leaders told a press conference on Wednesday after unveiling a report on China.

"One of the biggest takeaways of this report has been the vulnerability of our supply chain with China," China Task Force Report head Congressman Michael McCaul said. "We must protect our critical supply and technologies like advanced semiconductor chips. We simply cannot afford to wait any longer."

McCaul said the Chinese Communist Party was the greatest long-term threat to the United States, posing a generational struggle.

Congress should pass legislation to "indicate a preference for sourcing rare strategic and critical materials, including rare earth materials from the National Technology and Industrial Base[and] expand the prohibition on acquiring certain sensitive materials from the PRC [People's Republic of China]," the report said.

Congress should also tighten up restrictions on acquiring such technologies as unmanned aerial vehicles and printed circuits from companies owned or otherwise controlled by Chinese entities, the report added.

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Presidential Debates Commission to Make Changes to Format After First Debate - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The Commission on Presidential Debates said in a statement on Wednesday that it will make changes to the format of the presidential debates following issues that emerged during the first debate between President Donald Trump and his Democratic rival Joe Biden last night.

The first debate has been widely criticized by the US public for being disorderly after moderator Chris Wallace failed to take control of the event.

"The Commission on Presidential Debates sponsors televised debates for the benefit of the American electorate," the statement said. "Last night's debate made clear that additional structure should be added to the format of the remaining debates to ensure a more orderly discussion of the issues."

The Commission on Presidential Debates also said it will carefully consider the changes that will be adopted and will announce the measures shortly.

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Congresswoman Warns US Military Build-Up in Poland May Cause 'Escalation' With Russia

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The Defense Department's plans to increase US military presence in Poland is a cause for concern because such a move may provoke an escalation near Russia's borders, Congresswoman Chrissy Houlahan said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"I am not certain that it is necessarily a deterrence, but possibly an escalation by moving troops to Poland. My father is Polish-born and so I personally have heard from him about the history of that war-torn area of our planet. And I worry about that," Houlahan told the US House Armed Services Committee.

As part of its plan to reduce military posture in Germany, the Department of Defense has proposed to redeploy 1,000 US troops to Poland in addition to the 4,500 troops already stationed there.

The Defense Department has said such a move would boost deterrence against Russia.

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US Offers \$5Mln Reward for Information on Venezuela Ex-Electricity Minister - Pompeo

(Adds sanction details, background in paras 5,6)

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has offered two rewards of up to \$5 million each for information that would lead to the arrest or conviction of former Venezuelan Minister of Electricity and his deputy, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a release on Wednesday.

"Today the US Department of State announces reward offers of up to \$5 million each for information leading to the arrests and/or convictions of Luis Alfredo Motta Dominguez and Eustiquio Jose Lugo Gomez," Pompeo said.

The Secretary of State explained that Motta Dominguez was named President of the National Electricity Corporation (Corpoelec) in Venezuela in 2015 and was appointed shortly thereafter to be the Minister of Electricity.

"Lugo Gomez was the Vice Minister of Finance, Investment, and Strategic Alliance in the Ministry of Electricity as well as procurement director at Corpoelec under Motta Dominguez," Pompeo added.

Pompeo said Dominguez and Gomez were indicted in Florida last June for allegedly awarding three companies more than \$60 million in exchange for bribes. A month later, the US banned the former officials, and their families, from entering the United States.

On Tuesday, the United States offered up to \$20 million for information leading to the arrest of three former Venezuelan public officials. Earlier in September, the US sanctioned Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and several other officials for cooperation with Iran and alleged attempts to manipulate the country's parliamentary elections.

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Kentucky Attorney General Asks Court to Delay Releasing Records in Breonna Taylor Case

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron said in a statement on Wednesday that he asked a local court to delay the release of the grand jury records in the case of Breonna Taylor so that private information can be redacted.

The court had ordered Cameron to make his grand jury presentation public by mid-day Wednesday.

"We are complying with the Judge's order," Cameron said. "The grand jury audio recording is more than 20 [hours] long and we filed a motion to request additional time, if the court permits it, to redact personally identifiable information of witnesses (addresses and phone numbers)."

The grand jury returned no indictments against two police officers who participated in executing a search warrant in Taylor's house in March during which she was killed. Cameron said last week that the use of deadly force by the two police officers was justified under Kentucky state law because they were fired upon by Taylor's boyfriend when entering the house.

A third officer was indicted on three counts of wanton endangerment after shots he fired during the police raid of Taylor's home went into an apartment next door and seriously endangered the three residents inside.

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UN Member States Commit Nearly \$1Bln for COVID-19 Response, Vaccine Access -
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"Nearly a billion dollars in new financing has been committed to the initiative ["COVID-19 Tools Accelerator"], which is really the most comprehensive multilateral solution for the pandemic," Dujarric said.

According to Dujarric, the largest contributions were made by the United Kingdom that gave \$732 million to support the initiative and aid vulnerable countries, Canada with \$332 million and Germany with about \$117 million in funding.

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US, Bangladesh Sign Air Transport Agreement to Boost Tourism, Commerce - State Department

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The United States and Bangladesh signed a bilateral civil aviation agreement to enhance tourism, commerce and quality of services, the US State Department said on Wednesday.

"On September 30, 2020, in Dhaka, Bangladesh, Ambassador Earl R. Miller and Ministry of Civil Aviation and Tourism Senior Secretary Mohamed Mohibul Haque signed the Air Transport

Agreement between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh," the department said in a statement.

The agreement allows the US to establish a civil aviation relationship with Bangladesh consistent with its Open Skies international aviation policy, and includes unrestricted capacity and frequency of services, open route rights, a liberal charter regime, and open code-sharing opportunities, the statement added.

The pact aims to promote tourism and commerce, ensure affordable and efficient air services, and boost people-to-people exchanges. The agreement, according to the statement, represents a step forward for the liberalization of civil aviation in the Indo-Pacific.

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US Targets 6 Persons, 13 Entities in New Syria Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted six people and 13 entities, including the Syrian Tourism Ministry, in new round of Syria-related sanctions, the US Department of the Treasury and the State Department announced in separate releases on Wednesday.

"Today, as part of the US government's continued effort to achieve a peaceful, political resolution of the Syrian conflict, the Department of the Treasury is taking action against key enablers of the Assad regime that are associated with the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Army, the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, and the Central Bank of Syria," the Treasury Department release said. "Specifically, Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) added three individuals and 13 entities to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List, pursuant to Syria sanctions authorities."

The Treasury Department said the sanctioned persons include Syrian businessman Khodr Taher Bin Ali, Husam Muhammad Louka and Hazem Younes Karfoul.

Taher has served as a prominent local intermediary and contractor for the designated Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Army, led by Maher al-Assad, the brother of President Bashar al-Assad, the release said.

The Treasury Department said Taher founded last year the telecommunications provider Emma Tel LLC that has spread in more than 20 locations around Syria, where it sells mobile phone equipment and provides related services.

"Bashar al-Assad's wife, Asma al-Assad, allegedly ordered the establishment of Emma Tel LLC in order to create alternatives to the business empire of Rami Makhlouf, the cousin of Bashar al-Assad, and to break the dominance of the Makhlouf-owned Syriatel Mobile Telecom on the Syrian telecommunications market," the release said. "Despite the reported linkages to Asma Al-Assad, Taher established Emma Tel LLC and owns 100 percent of its shares."

In addition, the Treasury Department said Taher recently founded the advertising company Ella Media Services LLC with an awarded license to manage Syria's largest billboard advertising network.

Both Emma Tel LLC and Ella Media Services LLC have been sanctioned on Wednesday, the release said.

"Today, OFAC also issued a general license authorizing persons to wind down transactions prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations involving Emma Tel LLC, or any entity in which Emma Tel LLC owns, directly or indirectly, a 50 percent or greater interest, for 90 days, as well as an FAQ which provides further guidance on the scope of the general license and the wind down of transactions involving Emma Tell LLC," the Treasury Department said.

The Treasury Department also said Taher partners via a joint venture with the Syrian Transport and Tourism Company called Syrian Hotel Management LLC.

"Taher owns two-thirds of the shares of the joint venture, while Syrian Transport and Tourism Company owns the remaining shares. The Syrian Transport and Tourism Company itself is owned 67 percent by the Syrian Ministry of Tourism," the release said.

Both Syrian Hotel Management LLC and Syrian Transport and Tourism have been designated by the Treasury Department on Wednesday.

The Treasury Department said the second individual it has designated is Husam Muhammad Louka, who serves as the head of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate (GID), and the third individual is Syria Central Bank Governor Hazem Younes Karfoul.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced in a separate release that the State Department has issued three designations.

"Specifically, we are designating 5th Corps commander Milad Jedid pursuant to Executive Order (E.O.) 13894 for his involvement in the obstruction, disruption, or prevention of a ceasefire in Syria," the release said. "Furthermore, we are designating Nasreen Ibrahim and Rana Ibrahim, the adult sisters of Assad financier Yasser Ibrahim... The Ibrahim family, led by Yasser Ibrahim, acts as a front for Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma al Akhras."

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Trudeau, Japanese Prime Minister Discuss Canadian Nationals Detained by Beijing - Ottawa

TORONTO, September 30 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau discussed relations with China and the detention of Canadian nationals by Beijing with Japanese Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide, Ottawa said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The leaders... discussed relations with China, including the arbitrary detention of two Canadian citizens," the statement said.

The two leaders also touched on monitoring sanctions enforcement against North Korea and efforts to combat the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and its associated impacts.

As of Wednesday, Canadian nationals - former diplomat Michael Kovrig and businessman Michael Spavor - have been in Chinese detention for over 600 days on espionage charges. Ottawa, however, maintains that the detentions are retaliatory measures for Canada's detention of Huawei Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou, who was detained in Vancouver in 2018 at the request of the United States.

This was the first conversation between the two G7 leaders following Suga's appointment to the post of prime minister earlier this month.

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White House Hopes for Compromise Over New COVID-19 Stimulus Before Election - Mnuchin

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The White House is still trying to get a new coronavirus stimulus package through Congress before the US presidential election in November and hopes a compromise will be reached with House of Representatives Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said on Wednesday.

"I spoke to speaker Pelosi several times over the weekend," Mnuchin said during an appearance on the CNBC network. "I say we're going to give it one more serious try to get this done and I think we're hopeful that we can get something done. I think there's a reasonable compromise here."

Republicans and Democrats have been locked in a stalemate for three months over a new installment of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.

Congress has so far passed four phases of the CARES Act that have approved roughly \$3 trillion to disburse as loans and grants to businesses, paycheck protection for workers and personal aid to qualifying US citizens and residents.

Both Republicans and Democrats have blamed each other for the drag over the fifth installment of the stimulus, which has become a political issue ahead of the November 3 election.

The Democrats first passed their own package called the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act for \$3 trillion and later suggested a slimmed-down version of \$2.2 trillion. The Republicans have said they will agree to an installment for just about half of that amount.

Mnuchin, however, said he and Pelosi have been "very effective in communicating" and will speak again on Wednesday afternoon.

"I think we'll have a very reasonable response, something that's very similar to what has been the bipartisan proposal the problem solvers have worked on, and I hope we can get something done," Mnuchin said.

The Treasury Secretary noted that are still many small businesses impacted by the novel coronavirus restrictive measures and are in need of protection to open up the economy.

"We're trying to see if both of us can manage a package that gets some of what everybody wants," Mnuchin said.

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US Announces Sanctions Against Head of Cuba's Business Conglomerate GAESA - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has moved to block the assets of Luis Alberto Rodriguez Lopez, the head of the Cuban military-owned conglomerate Grupo de Administracion Empresarial S.A. (GAESA), and prohibit US persons to deal with him, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) added Cuban national... Lopez-Callejas to OFAC's list of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons," Pompeo said. "All assets, property, and interests of property of Mr. Rodriguez Lopez-Calleja that are subject to US jurisdiction... continue to be blocked, and US persons are generally prohibited from dealing with him."

US media describe GAESA as a business empire in control of more than 50 enterprises in "virtually every profitable area of the Cuban economy."

Pompeo said the revenue generated from GAESA's economic activities is used to oppress the Cuban people and to fund Cuba's "parasitic, colonial domination of Venezuela."

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UN Chief Says at Biodiversity Summit None of Global Targets Set for 2020 Achieved

UNITED NATIONS, September 30 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in his speech at the Summit on Biodiversity on Wednesday that none of the biodiversity targets, agreed by member states in 2010 to be reached by this year, have been achieved.

"Ten years ago, we secured commitments that should have protected our planet. We have largely failed," Guterres said. "Despite repeated commitments, our efforts have not been sufficient to meet any of the global biodiversity targets set for 2020."

Guterres was referring to the 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets agreed by countries in 2010 to be reached by 2020 to address the causes of biodiversity loss, promote sustainability, safeguard ecosystems and advance implementation of relevant strategies.

The UN chief warned that one of the consequences of the current imbalance between people and nature is the emergence of deadly diseases, such as the novel coronavirus outbreak.

"75 percent of new infectious diseases are zoonotic, passing from animals to humans, demonstrating the intimate interconnection between the health of our planet and our own," Guterres said.

The global novel coronavirus outbreak was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11. To date, more than 33.7 million people have been infected with the novel coronavirus worldwide, with over 1 million fatalities and 25 million people who have overcome the disease, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

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CORRECTION - US, Italy Want Russia to Fully Account for Alleged Navalny Poisoning - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday that the United States and Italy agreed that the Russian government should fully account for the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny and hold those behind the incident to account.

"We agreed that the Russian government must provide a full accounting for the poisoning of Alex Navalny and hold those involved responsible," Pompeo said at a joint press conference with Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio in Rome.

On August 20, Navalny fell ill during a domestic Russian flight. He was initially treated in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the plane made an emergency landing. Two days later, once the doctors established he was fit for cross-border aerial transportation, the man was flown to the Berlin-based Charite hospital for further treatment.

Later, the German government said that doctors found traces of a nerve agent from the Novichok group in his system. Moscow responded by pointing out the lack of evidence in Berlin's claims and noting that Russian doctors had found no toxic substances in Navalny. The opposition activist was discharged from the hospital on September 23 and is expected to make a full recovery.

Pompeo is currently on a visit to Italy as part of his week-long tour in Europe's eastern Mediterranean region that includes stops in Greece, Croatia and the Vatican.

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US Receives 1st Iron Dome Missile Battery From Israel - Defense Ministry

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Israel delivered on Wednesday the first of two Iron Dome missile defense batteries ordered by the United States, Israel's Ministry of Defense said in a statement.

"Today the Israel Missile Defense Organization in the Ministry of Defense, delivered the first of two Iron Dome Defense System batteries to the US Army," the Defense Ministry said via Twitter. The Iron Dome battery was transported aboard a Ukrainian cargo plane. A second battery is scheduled to be delivered by the end of this year.

"The completion of this agreement serves as further proof that the defense alliance [between the United States and Israel] is based on common values and interests, which are stronger than ever," Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz said.

The Iron Dome, designed specifically to shoot down short-range projectiles, is believed to be the world's most-used missile defense system with more than 2,500 operational intercepts and a success rate exceeding 90 percent. It is deployed mainly along Israel's southern borders to counter Palestinian attacks from Gaza.

On Tuesday, US Army Space and Missile Defense Command head Daniel Karbler mentioned the acquisition of the Iron Dome as being among the most anticipated events and said that he is looking forward to see how the system would perform. US defense contractor Raytheon and

Rafael signed an agreement last month to produce the Iron Dome in the United States to complement the initial deliveries from Israel.

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Pompeo Says Discussed With Italian Foreign Minister Russia's 'Destabilizing' Behavior

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said during a press conference in Rome on Wednesday that his talks with Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio included the situation in Venezuela and Russia's alleged destabilizing activities.

"We also talked about Russia's aggressive and destabilizing behavior in Europe and around the world," Pompeo said. "I raised the importance of standing with the legitimate government of Juan Guaido and Venezuelan people as how the 60 nations do including the vast majority of the EU member states."

Pompeo is visiting Italy as part of his week-long tour in Europe's eastern Mediterranean region that involve trips to Greece, Croatia and the Vatican.

Since 2014, the United States and its allies have exerted political and economic pressure on Russia over its alleged involvement in the Ukrainian conflict as well as the referendum in Crimea that resulted in the peninsula's reunification with Russia. The United States, European Union and a number of other countries, including Canada and Australia, have since imposed several rounds of sanctions on Russia's trade, energy, banking and defense sectors.

Russia has denied the Western allegations and taken countermeasures, the most well-known being the adoption of a policy favoring domestic production over imports. Numerous European producers, especially small agricultural businesses, have decried the loss of opportunity to export produce to the Russian market and urged their respective governments to lift the sanctions.

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US Targets 3 Persons, 13 Entities in New Syria Sanctions - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted three people and 13 entities, including the Syrian Tourism Ministry, in new round of Syria-related sanctions, the US Department of the Treasury announced in a release on Wednesday.

"Today, as part of the US government's continued effort to achieve a peaceful, political resolution of the Syrian conflict, the Department of the Treasury is taking action against key enablers of the Assad regime that are associated with the Fourth Division of the Syrian Arab Army, the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate, and the Central Bank of Syria," the release said. "Specifically, Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) added three individuals

and 13 entities to the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List, pursuant to Syria sanctions authorities."

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US, Italy Want Russia to Be Held 'Accountable' for Alleged Navalny Poisoning - Pompeo

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday that the United States and Italy agreed that the Russian government should be held fully accountable for the alleged poisoning of opposition figure Alexey Navalny, though Moscow denies any involvement.

"We agreed that the Russian government must be fully accountable for the poisoning of Alexey Navalny," Pompeo said at a joint press conference with Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio in Rome.

On August 20, Navalny fell ill during a domestic Russian flight. He was initially treated in the Siberian city of Omsk, where the plane made an emergency landing. Two days later, once the doctors established he was fit for cross-border aerial transportation, the man was flown to the Berlin-based Charite hospital for further treatment.

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Pompeo Warns Italy's Conte of 'Risks' of Doing Business With China - State Dept

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Michael Pompeo during talks with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in Rome emphasized the risks of doing business with China, Principal Deputy Spokesperson Cale Brown said in a readout on Wednesday.

"Secretary Pompeo highlighted the substantial business and investment ties between the United States and Italy and noted the risks associated with doing business with the People's Republic of China (PRC)," Brown said.

Pompeo and Conte discussed also Italy's strong efforts against the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as Washington's assistance to the country.

"The Secretary and the Prime Minister also reaffirmed our shared commitment to the Transatlantic partnership, peaceful resolution of the conflict in Libya through the UN process, and countering the influence of malign actors in Europe," the spokesperson added. Pompeo is currently on a visit to Italy as part of his week-long tour in Europe's eastern Mediterranean region that includes stops in Greece, Croatia and the Vatican.

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US GDP Plunged by 31.4% in Second Quarter - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The US economy shrank at its fastest pace in the country's history in the second quarter of 2020, contracting by 31.4 percent amid widespread lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commerce Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) decreased at an annual rate of 31.4 percent in the second quarter of 2020," the Bureau of Economic Analysis, an unit within the Commerce Department, said in its "third" and final estimate of Q2 GDP. The change was 0.3 percentage point higher than the "second" estimate released in August, it said, adding that in the first quarter of 2020, real GDP decreased 5.0 percent.

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RPT: Baranov Statue Relocated From Sitka City Center to Local History Museum - Director

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) – The statue of the first governor of Russian America Alexander Baranov has been relocated from downtown Sitka, Alaska to the local history museum, the museum's executive director Hal Spackman told Sputnik.

"The statue was cleaned and removed from its podium this morning and relocated to our museum," Spackman said on Tuesday. "We hope to have the statue on display for the public by the end of October."

In July, the city assembly adopted a resolution to relocate the Baranov statue to the Sitka Historical Society Museum, after a group of local activists urged legislators to remove it, citing mistreatment of indigenous people. In 1799, Baranov founded Sitka - called at that time Novo-Archangelsk - as the capital of the Russian colonies in North America.

"The move went smoothly. The contractor charged with building the base is working with us on the design phase at this time," Spackman added.

The museum is ready to work with anyone who wishes to provide information about Baranov's life and his legacy as the first governor of Russian Alaska, the executive director noted.

"At this time, I have only been contacted by one Russian diaspora group who has expressed an interest in providing information about Baranov," he said. "We are willing to work with this, or any other group, should they wish to have input."

Last week, Spackman told Sputnik that the group offered assistance with providing information was the Russian Cultural Center in Alaska.

In July, the Russian Community Council of the USA (RCC), which previously organized a petition and collected almost 6,000 signatures against removing the statue, sent a letter to the museum asking that it cooperate with the Russian diaspora in providing comprehensive information about Baranov to visitors.

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RPT: REVIEW - Trump, Biden Trade Insults in Fiery Presidential Debate

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump and the Democratic nominee Joe Biden traded personal accusations, unceremoniously interrupted each other and passionately sparred on topics such as COVID-19, protests, and election integrity in the first round of the presidential debates.

BLOODY FIRST ROUND

The moderator of Tuesday night's debate, FOX TV anchor Chris Wallace, had a hard time enforcing the rules of the showdown in Cleveland, Ohio, and even had to raise his voice when the debaters interrupted each other or diverged from the topics they were supposed to discuss. Eight in ten voters who watched the event called its tone "negative," according to a CBS News poll. A majority of watchers believe that Biden won the debate - 48 percent as opposed to 41 percent who say that Trump gained the upper hand and 10 percent who declared it a tie. Seeking to dispel rumors of his age-related sluggishness, Biden called Trump "the worst president America has ever had" and energetically attacked his handling of the coronavirus outbreak, economic crisis and racial unrest, while the incumbent defended his record.

"Under this president we have become weaker, sicker, more divided and more violent," the former vice president said.

At one point, in trying to fend off the interruptions, Biden called Trump a "clown." Trump, for his part, at multiple points questioned Biden's intelligence.

"You graduated either the lowest or almost the lowest in your class," Trump said.

Biden responded by laughing.

The former vice president called Trump "Putin's puppy" and criticized him for failing to raise with the Russian President the issue of bounties that Russia allegedly pays to Afghan militants for killing American soldiers. US administration officials said that they checked, but failed to find any proof of the story.

COVID AND ECONOMY

On the issue of the pandemic, which has claimed more than 200,000 lives in the US and is still rampant, Biden accused Trump of "panicking" and having no plan to protect Americans.

"If we had listened to you, the country would have been left wide open and millions would have died," Biden said.

Trump responded and promised that the country is "weeks away" from a vaccine that would defeat the virus. Trump said even opponents give him credit for doing "a phenomenal job."

"I'll tell you, Joe, you could never have done the job we've done. You don't have it in your blood," Trump said.

"I don't trust him at all," Biden responded.

Trump accused Biden of wanting to shut down the economy again and warned of accompanying societal problems, including alcoholism, drug abuse and divorces.

According to Biden, all Trump is concerned about economically is the stock market to the benefit of a handful of billionaires.

Trump inherited a booming economy and he blew it, Biden claimed. He added that the incumbent will be the first US President to leave office with fewer jobs than he had when assuming it.

Trump alleged that under the Obama-Biden administration the US had the slowest economic recovery since the Great Depression and accused them of giving up on manufacturing, that he took credit for bringing back from overseas.

SCANDALS

Trump was asked if it is true that he contributed just \$750 yearly in taxes for 2016 and 2017 and paid no income taxes at all in ten of the previous 15 years largely because of reported business losses.

"I paid millions in taxes, millions in income taxes," he responded.

The president admitted, however, that as a private entrepreneur he was entitled to generous tax breaks passed during the Obama-Biden administration.

"Show us your tax returns," Biden demanded. Trump promised to do it, but did not say when.

Biden had to respond to allegations that his son Hunter received hefty sums from foreign businessmen and firms, including Ukraine's Burisma and the wife of the former Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov.

"None of that is true, [it is] totally discredited," Biden said as Trump launched the allegations.

ELECTION INTEGRITY, POLICY ISSUES

Trump insisted that the Senate is entitled to proceed with confirmation of his Supreme Court pick, Amy Coney Barrett, known for her Conservative views. President argued that he has a four-year mandate and is duty-bound to fill the vacancy.

Biden urged the Senate to halt proceedings until after the November 3 elections, saying that the will of those who have casted ballots in advance voting has to be respected.

Trump argued that the Supreme Court will need to weigh-in on the millions of mailed ballots that will be cast. The president has for months claimed that mail-in ballots will lead to widespread voter fraud.

The president during the debate said the results of the November 3 election may not be known for "months."

The candidates also clashed on the violent protests that have engulfed the country this year, initially erupting after police involved killing of Blacks.

Trump claimed that Biden would not be able to restore law and order and accused the president of wanting to "defund" the police. The former vice president sternly rejected the accusation, and fired back.

"I am totally opposed to defunding police," Biden said during the debate in Cleveland on Tuesday.

Biden said Trump wants to cut \$400 million from the law enforcement budgets.

Trump said the spike in innercity violence is a "political party issue" and continued to blame Democratic mayors.

On climate change, Trump tried to persuade viewers that Biden embraces a "green" environmental legislation that has been pushed by left-leaning members of the Democratic Party. Biden rejected the allegations. Biden did however vow to rejoin the Paris climate accord if elected.

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Trump said the spike in innercity violence is a "political party issue" and continued to blame Democratic mayors.

On climate change, Biden tried to persuade viewers that Biden embrace a "green" environmental legislation that has been pushed by left-leaning members of the Democratic Party. Biden rejected the allegations. He did however vow to rejoin the Paris climate accord if elected.

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Trump Says US 'Weeks Away' From COVID-19 Vaccine, Biden Says President Lacks Plan

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said the country is weeks away from getting a vaccine to fight the coronavirus.

Trump made the comments in Cleveland, Ohio on stage with former Vice President Joe Biden during the first presidential debate of the 2020 US Presidential election campaign.

"Now we are weeks away from the vaccine," Trump said on Tuesday.

"I don't trust him at all," Biden responded to Trump's vaccine statement.

Trump countered saying that a vaccine can be available sooner if not for political interference and accused the former vice president of sowing distrust in potential vaccines.

Trump also accused Biden of wanting to shut down the economy and warned of accompanying societal problems, including alcoholism, drug abuse and marital problems should that occur.

The Democratic challenger responded saying that the president had no plan and has handled the pandemic irresponsibly, citing the US' world's highest COVID-19 death toll.

The two candidates also sparred over allegations that Trump contributed just \$750 yearly in taxes for 2016 and 2017 and paid no income taxes at all in ten of the previous 15 years largely because of reported business losses.

Trump doubled down on his claim that he has paid "millions of dollars" in taxes, while admitting that he does not want to pay more taxes than entitled to and slamming Biden and previous administrations for legislating generous tax breaks for the wealthy. Biden responded saying that these tax breaks would be eliminated should he be elected president.

During debate, Trump insisted that the Senate can proceed with confirmation of his Supreme Court pick, Amy Coney Barrett, arguing that he has a four-year mandate and is duty-bound to fill the Supreme Court vacancy.

Biden urged the Senate to halt proceedings until after the November 3 elections, saying that the will of those who have casted ballots in advance voting has to be respected.

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Biden Says He Totally Opposes Defunding Police

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - Democratic challenger Joe Biden during a debate against President Donald Trump said he is opposed to defunding police departments.

"I am totally opposed to defunding police," Biden said during the debate in Cleveland on Tuesday.

Biden said Trump wants to cut \$400 million from the law enforcement budgets.

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Trump Says US 'Weeks Away' From COVID-19 Vaccine

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump said the country is weeks away from getting a vaccine to fight the coronavirus.

"Now we are weeks away from the vaccine," Trump said during a presidential debate with his Democratic rival Joe Biden on Tuesday.

"I don't trust him at all," Biden responded on Trump's vaccine statement.

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US Court Sentences Russia's Yevgeniy Nikulin to 88 Months in Jail Over Cybercrimes

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - A US court in San Francisco has sentenced Russian national Yevgeniy Nikulin to 88 months in jail over cybercrimes.

"It is [the] judgment of the court to sentence him to a grand total of 88 months," Judge William Alsup said during the live-streamed hearing on Tuesday.

The US government insisted on 145 months, while the defense asked for time served, the judge added.

He refused to make a final statement in self-defense. "I am not going to make any statements," he said in Russian via interpreter.

Nikulin was sentenced for 64 months for 3 counts of the indictment, and for an additional 24 months for another 2 counts.

The judge has imposed a 3-year term of supervised release.

"Upon release, the defendant will likely be deported and will not be in the US to be supervised," he said. "The defendant shall comply with the rules of the Bureau of Immigration and Customs

Enforcement, and if reported, shall not re-enter the US without the expressed consent of the Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security."

In his final speech before sentencing, Alsup mentioned that he took into account several aspects, including the novel coronavirus pandemic and impossibility to Nikulin's family to visit him because of this situation and his mother's bad health.

"COVID-19 is a factor that makes prison time harder than two years ago," he said.

Alsup recognized "a significant chance" that Nikulin will return to computer hacking upon coming back to Russia.

"Mr. Nikulin, you are a brilliant guy, very smart. I hope you will do something good in your life, rather than hacking computers," the judge said.

The Czech police detained the Russian national in October 2016 and extradited him to the US in March 2018. The Russian authorities, who charged Nikulin with Internet fraud in 2009, requested his extradition on the same day as the United States, but the Czech Republic's Justice Ministry granted the US request.

The US accused Nikulin of hacking into computers belonging to LinkedIn, Dropbox and Formspring's online services. Nikulin has pleaded not guilty.

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Pompeo to Travel to Japan, S. Korea, Mongolia From October 4-8 - State Department

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo will travel to Japan, South Korea and Mongolia from October 4-8, State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a press release.

"Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo will travel to Tokyo, Japan; Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; and Seoul, the Republic of Korea (ROK) October 4 to 8," Ortagus said in the release on Tuesday. In Tokyo, Ortagus said, Pompeo will attend the second meeting of the Quad Foreign Ministers of Australia, India, and Japan on October 6. Pompeo will also meet with his Japanese counterparts to discuss issues of mutual concern, Ortagus said.

Pompeo will visit Ulaanbaatar on October 7 and Seoul on October 7-8 to meet with senior officials, Ortagus said without providing details of the talks.

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Senate Advances Bill to Extend Federal Funding to Avoid US Government Shutdown

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - The US Senate has advanced a bill that was passed in the House of Representatives to extend federal funding through December 11 in order to avoid a government shutdown this week.

The Senate on Tuesday voted 82-6 to advance the House-passed spending bill.

A final vote is expected before the government funding expires on Wednesday at midnight. The last government shutdown, albeit a partial one, occurred between late December 2018 and late January 2019.

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UN Security Council Calls on Azerbaijan, Armenia to Immediately Cease Fighting - President

UNITED NATIONS, September 30 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council expressed concern over the clashes between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh region and called for an immediate cessation of hostiles and return to the negotiating table, Niger Ambassador to the United Nations Abdou Abarry said in a statement.

Earlier on Tuesday, the UN Security Council held an emergency meeting behind closed doors and discussed the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan that started over the weekend.

"The Security Council members expressed concern over reports of large-scale military actions along the Line of Contact in the Nagorno-Karabakh contact zone," Abarry said. "The Security Council members voiced support for the call by the Secretary-General on the sides to immediately stop fighting, de-escalate tensions and return to meaningful negotiations without delay."

The UN Security Council strongly condemned the loss of life and backed the statement issued earlier by the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres who called on both sides to halt the fighting and return to negotiations, Abarry said.

In addition, the UN Security Council expressed support for the central role of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe Minsk Group co-chairs and urged the sides to work closely with them, Abarry said.

On Sunday, Yerevan and Baku accused each other of military provocations in the disputed breakaway republic of Nagorno-Karabakh. Azerbaijan announced that the Armenian military had shelled settlements on the contact line in the area. According to the Armenian Defense Ministry, Nagorno-Karabakh "was subjected to air and missile attacks."

Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia declared martial law and general mobilization. Azerbaijan first said it had no such need, but later said it declared a partial martial law and partial mobilization. A number of states, including Russia, Germany and France, urged the parties to exercise restraint. Turkey has said it would provide Azerbaijan with any support it asks for.

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The US government insisted on 145 months, while the defense asked for time served, the judge added.

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Documents Reveal Clinton Approved 2016 Plan to Claim Trump Ties to Putin - Ratcliffe

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US Director of National Intelligence (DNI) John Ratcliffe has sent a letter to the US Judiciary Committee saying he declassified documents from 2016 that reveal Russian intelligence believed Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton may have approved a plan to falsely smear her opponent Donald Trump by alleging he had close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"I have declassified the following: In late July 2016, US intelligence agencies obtained insight into Russian intelligence analysis alleging that US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton had approved a campaign plan to stir up a scandal against US Presidential candidate Donald Trump by tying him to Putin and the Russians' hacking of the Democratic National Committee," Ratcliffe wrote in the letter addressed to Judiciary Committee Chair Lindsey Graham on Tuesday.

According to his handwritten notes, former Central Intelligence Agency Director John Brennan subsequently briefed President Barack Obama and other senior national security officials on the intelligence, Ratcliffe wrote.

The briefing to Obama included the "alleged approval by Hillary Clinton on July 26, 2016 of a proposal from one of her foreign policy advisors to vilify Donald Trump by stirring up a scandal claiming interference by Russian security services," the letter said.

On September 7, 2016, US intelligence officials forwarded an investigative referral to FBI Director James Comey and Deputy Assistant Director of Counterintelligence Peter Strzok regarding "US Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton's approval of a plan concerning US

Presidential candidate Donald Trump and Russian hackers hampering US elections as a means of distracting the public from her use of a private mail server," the letter also noted. The Intelligence Community is offering the Senate Judiciary Committee a classified briefing with further details, Ratcliffe said.

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"The Security Council members voiced support for the call by the Secretary-General on the sides to immediately stop fighting, de-escalate tensions and return to meaningful negotiations without delay," Abarry said.

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Envoy to UN General Assembly: North Korea Directs All Efforts to Economic Construction

UNITED NATIONS, September 30 (Sputnik) - North Korea's Ambassador to the United Nations Kim Song told the UN General Assembly that his country currently directs all efforts for economic construction.

"Based on its reliable guarantee for safeguarding the security of the state and its people, the DPRK [North Korea] is now directing all its efforts to economic construction," Kim said on Tuesday.

The ambassador pointed out that North Korea requires a favorable external environment allowing economic construction to take place.

North Korea's nuclear program has been subject to concerns of the international community for decades now. A number of countries and international organizations, including the United Nations, have imposed sanctions against North Korea that have put restrictions on humanitarian aid to the country.

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RECAST - US Special Envoy Departs for Doha to Support More Intra-Afghan Peace Talks - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - US Special Representative for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad has departed for Doha, Qatar, to support additional intra-Afghan peace talks this week, the Department of State said in a statement on Tuesday.

"US Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation Zalmay Khalilzad departed for Doha, Qatar and the region on September 29," the statement said. "While in the region, Ambassador Khalilzad will meet with partners to discuss Afghan-owned, Afghan-led peace negotiations and prospects for increased regional connectivity, trade, and development following a peace settlement."

Khalilzad will meet with all the negotiating teams involved in the intra-Afghan peace talks "to hear updates on their efforts" to reach a negotiated settlement to end the conflict in the country. The intra-Afghan negotiations began on September 12, with both sides publicly expressing their desire to conclude a secure and long-lasting ceasefire to end Afghanistan's long-running conflict.

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Baranov Statue Relocated From Sitka City Center to Local History Museum - Director

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) – The statue of the first governor of Russian America Alexander Baranov has been relocated from downtown Sitka, Alaska to the local history museum, the museum's executive director Hal Spackman told Sputnik.

"The statue was cleaned and removed from its podium this morning and relocated to our museum," Spackman said on Tuesday. "We hope to have the statue on display for the public by the end of October."

In July, the city assembly adopted a resolution to relocate the Baranov statue to the Sitka Historical Society Museum, after a group of local activists urged legislators to remove it, citing mistreatment of indigenous people. In 1799, Baranov founded Sitka - called at that time Novo-Archangelsk - as the capital of the Russian colonies in North America.

"The move went smoothly. The contractor charged with building the base is working with us on the design phase at this time," Spackman added.

The museum is ready to work with anyone who wishes to provide information about Baranov's life and his legacy as the first governor of Russian Alaska, the executive director noted.

"At this time, I have only been contacted by one Russian diaspora group who has expressed an interest in providing information about Baranov," he said. "We are willing to work with this, or any other group, should they wish to have input."

Last week, Spackman told Sputnik that the group offered assistance with providing information was the Russian Cultural Center in Alaska.

In July, the Russian Community Council of the USA (RCC), which previously organized a petition and collected almost 6,000 signatures against removing the statue, sent a letter to the

museum asking that it cooperate with the Russian diaspora in providing comprehensive information about Baranov to visitors.

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North Korea's COVID-19 Situation Under 'Safe and Stable' Control - Envoy at UNGA

UNITED NATIONS, September 30 (Sputnik) - North Korea's Ambassador to the United Nations Kim Song told the UN General Assembly on Tuesday that the novel coronavirus epidemic in his country is under safe and stable control.

"Thanks to the far-sighted leadership of the government of the DPRK [North Korea], taking the 'people first' policy as it's political philosophy and idea, the anti-epidemic situation in our country is now under safe and stable control," Kim said Tuesday.

On July 26, North Korea said that a man, who had left the country three years ago and illegally arrived back on July 19, was suspected of being infected with COVID-19. The man was detained in the border city of Kaesong and his coronavirus test was uncertain.

Later, North Korean media reported that the country had not still confirmed any COVID-19 cases. However, Kaesong was fully isolated, and the North Korean authorities declared a state of emergency in the city, until the lockdown was reportedly lifted in mid-August.

The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic on March 11. To date, more than 33.4 million people have been infected with the coronavirus worldwide, with over 1 million fatalities, according to Johns Hopkins University.

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Trudeau COVID-19 Recovery Plan Gets Majority Approval Boosting Government Support - Poll

TORONTO, September 30 (Sputnik) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's COVID-19 economic recovery plan has majority backing among Canadians and appears to have boosted support for his incumbent Liberal government, a Leger poll revealed.

Last week, in a speech delivered on Trudeau's behalf the Prime Minister said that his government will launch a program to add one million jobs to the economy, returning employment levels back to pre-pandemic levels.

Forty three percent of respondents felt "somewhat confident" that the recovery plan unveiled last Wednesday will "lead to more jobs and a stronger economy in the future." Nine percent were certain that the recovery plan would be successful, while 39 percent expressed non-confidence in the plan, according to Tuesday's poll.

The plan boosted support for the current government, with 40 percent of respondents saying that in the event of an election they would cast a vote for Trudeau's Liberals, while 30 percent back the Conservative Party and 17 percent favor the New Democrat Party (NDP).

Rejection of Trudeau's vision for the impending economic recovery by all the major opposition parties, would have brought down the current government and triggered a fall election. Fears of an election have since been calmed after NDP leader Jagmeet Singh announced that his party reached an agreement with the Liberal government and will support the recovery plan.

In May, polls showed the Liberal Party ahead by as many as 11 points nationally, boosted by majority support for the federal government's response to the pandemic. However, in the aftermath of the WE Charity scandal, pollsters have Canada's preeminent political parties – the Liberals and Conservatives – locked in a virtual deadlock ahead of the throne speech at the end of September.

While the recovery plan appears to have support among Canada's political center, opposition on both sides of the political spectrum have slammed the plan.

Climate Strike Canada spokesperson Cooper Price told Sputnik that the next generation of Canadian environmental activists are not impressed with Trudeau's proposals, calling them "just empty words" and the continuation of the status quo.

Premier Jason Kenney of Alberta, Canada's largest oil-producing province, said that the prime minister's recovery strategy a "fantasy plan."

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US Sentences Chinese National to 5 Years Over Money Laundering Charges - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - A US federal judge has sentenced a citizen of China to five years in jail for laundering millions of dollars for Mexican drug cartels, the Department of Justice announced in a press release.

"A Chinese national was sentenced today to five years in prison and ordered to forfeit more than \$4.2 million for laundering drug proceeds generated by large-scale cocaine trafficking in the United States," the release said Tuesday.

According to court documents, Xueyong Wu, 40, established relationships with Latin American drug trafficking organizations to transport and launder their United States-based drug proceeds, the Justice Department said.

Much of this money was generated through movement of cocaine or payment for cocaine that took place within the Eastern District of Virginia, the Justice Department added.

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New York Will Offer Residents Masks But Fine Those Who Do Not Wear Them - Mayor

WASHINGTON, September 29 (Sputnik) - New York City will provide free surgical masks to residents, but will fine anyone who refuses to wear a mask in public, Mayor Bill de Blasio said during a news conference.

"Anyone who is not wearing a face covering will be offered one, will be reminded it is required," de Blasio said on Tuesday. "And anyone who refuses to wear a face covering will be told that if they don't put one on, they will be fined. We don't want to fine people. If we have to, we will, and that will be starting on a large scale today."

De Blasio said the daily rate of novel coronavirus cases is 3.25 percent, which is above the threshold for keeping schools open, and the city's weekly average of 1.38 percent is still well below the seven-day average.

Mask mandates have become a major political issue in the United States with numerous citizens refusing to wear one on the grounds that surgical masks' material and fit do not prevent virus particles from passing through.

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US House Panel Subpoenas Security Official Over Alleged Bid to Silence Whistleblower

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - A US House panel subpoenaed a top official from the homeland security department to testify over alleged efforts to silence a whistleblower, chairman Adam Schiff announced in a statement.

"[B]ecause of the Department's unlawful obstruction, we require the head of the Office of Intelligence and Analysis, Joseph Maher, to appear before the Committee this Friday to testify under oath about why the Department is not meeting its legal obligations to comply," Schiff said Tuesday.

The committee is investigating allegations including the alleged suppression of intelligence reports about Russia's election interference.

They also allege the department modified intelligence on the threat of white supremacists.

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Trump Offers Condolences on Death of Kuwaiti Emir Sabah - White House

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik) - US President Donald Trump offered condolences over the death of 91-year-old Kuwait Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah.

"I am deeply saddened by the passing of my dear friend, His Highness the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah," Trump said in a statement on Tuesday. "Melania and I send our sincere condolences to the people of Kuwait."

Earlier in the day, Kuwaiti emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah died in the United States where he was receiving medical treatment.

Crown Prince Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah has been appointed as the new Emir of Kuwait after his death and will be sworn in on Wednesday.

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Russian Embassy in Ottawa Says Canadian Sanctions on Belarus Violate International Law

TORONTO, September 30 (Sputnik) - Canadian sanctions imposed on Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, his son Viktor, and other top officials violate international law, the Russian Embassy in Ottawa said in a statement.

Earlier in the day, Canada in coordination with the United Kingdom imposed sanctions against the Lukashenkos as well as Interior Minister Yuri Karaev, Election Commission Head Lidia Yermoshina and seven other top officials.

"Canadian sanctions [against] Belarus are illegal and defy international law," the Embassy said via Twitter Tuesday.

The Embassy added that Russia stands with Belarus to counter the US-led attack by Canada and the United Kingdom, as part of the Union State framework between the two countries.

The Belarusian government has not indicated that it will respond with its own measures.

On August 9, the Belarusian opposition organized protests after disputing the results of the presidential election in which Lukashenko was reelected for a sixth term by winning 80 percent of the vote. The opposition insists that its candidate, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, won the election. Lukashenko has repeatedly accused Western nations of direct interference in the internal affairs of Belarus. Russia has also voiced concerns over foreign interference in the neighboring country.

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US, UAE to Hold Informal UNSC Meeting Wednesday to Discuss Peace Deals With Israel - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, September 29 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Wednesday will jointly hold an informal briefing with member states of the UN Security Council to discuss how the Abraham Accords could help to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, US Mission to the United Nations Political Coordinator Rodney Hunter said at a Security Council meeting.

"Tomorrow, we will be co-hosting with the UAE an informal briefing with Security Council members to discuss these peace agreements," Hunter said on Tuesday. "This briefing will provide the opportunity for candid discussion about how these agreements could serve as a springboard to break the deadlock on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict."

The US diplomat also called on the Palestinian leaders and the UN Security Council to embrace the opportunities offered by the peace agreements.

"And we hope that other Arab states can build on the Accords while also encouraging the Palestinians to hold direct talks with Israel," he added.

On September 15, the UAE and Bahrain officially reconciled with Israel by signing US-brokered peace agreements during a ceremony at the White House.

The agreement signed with the UAE is a peace treaty for establishing diplomatic ties and full normalization of relations, while the agreement with Bahrain is a declaration of peace.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 30 (Sputnik)

NAGORNO-KARABAKH TENSIONS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan over the telephone and expressed serious concern over the hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin said on Tuesday.

* Pashinyan said Turkey is de facto involved in the ongoing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh.

* There are mechanisms for resolving the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, the role of Moscow in this is very active, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

* Azerbaijan President Ilham Aliyev said Baku's response to what he called Yerevan's aggression was adequate, and described the situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh region as tense.

* The number of civilian fatalities in a conflict in the Karabakh region has grown to 12, the number of the injured civilians has increased to 35, the office of the Azerbaijan Prosecutor General told Sputnik.

* Turkey is ready to support Azerbaijan, which is currently involved in a conflict with Armenia over the Karabakh region, at the negotiating table and in combat, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said.

AIR LEAK AT INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION

* An air leak was found in the Russian segment of the International Space Station, but there is no danger to the crew, a spokesperson for the Russian space agency told Sputnik on Tuesday.

BELARUS DEVELOPMENTS

* Canada has imposed sanctions on Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko, his son Viktor, Interior Minister Yuri Karaev, Election Commission Head Lidia Yermoshina and seven other officials over the alleged election fraud and violence against protesters, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Tuesday.

* Belarus is launching response measures to the Baltic countries' increased list of sanctioned Belarusian officials, the spokesman for the Foreign Ministry Anatoly Glaz said.

* The United Kingdom has imposed sanctions against Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko and other government officials, the Foreign Office said Tuesday in a statement.

PRESIDENTIAL RACE IN US

* Democratic candidate Joe Biden has released his tax returns ahead of the first presidential debate Tuesday in a move that could add pressure on President Donald Trump, who has not done the same and has been accused by the New York Times of having underpaid or not paid any taxes for many years.

* The campaign of US President Donald Trump denies claims by the team of his rival Joe Biden that it asked the moderator of the upcoming presidential debate to avoid mentioning Coronavirus death toll, Trump campaign spokesman Tim Murtaugh said in a statement.

* Nearly every three-in-four voters in the United States plan to watch the first presidential debate on Tuesday night, but only 3 percent of them believe the debate can influence their choice on Election Day, a new poll by Monmouth University revealed.